***Selma* Viewing Guide**

(Adapted from Teaching Tolerance)

**The Setting**

1963, Selma, Alabama

Jim Crow has ruled here for over 70 years. Despite some notable judicial and legal victories, segregation remains deeply embedded throughout the small towns and cities of the South. Selma, Alabama, is one such place.

In Selma, as in other communities, people are organizing. The Dallas County Voters League (DCVL) encourages black citizens to register to vote, but fear keeps most would-be registrants at home. The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) has come to town, organizing high school students, and soon the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) will arrive. Selma will no longer be a little-known city in Alabama. As the nation watches, it will become a key battleground in the struggle for equality.

But why Selma? Black and white students still attend separate schools and most public places remain segregated even after the Civil Rights Act of 1964 is passed. Selma has a locally organized civil rights movement, led largely by the DCVL; a history of student demonstrations, thanks to SNCC; and the city’s black leaders are ready to welcome outside assistance from the SCLC. Most importantly, the hardline tactics of Dallas County Sheriff Jim Clark guarantee arrests that will attract the national spotlight.

**The Groups**

**The Dallas County Voters League**, a local group led mainly by Selma teachers, worked to encourage black citizens to register to vote and held classes to prepare them for the literacy and civics tests.

The **Ku Klux Klan** first emerged during Reconstruction as a vigilante group that used horrific violence to intimidate and control Southern blacks. The white supremacist group arose again during the 1950s and 1960s. Members used violence—including bombings and murder—in a campaign of terror against supporters of the civil rights movement.

The **Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC)** organized students to take direct action such as sit-ins, freedom rides and voter registration drives to bring an end to segregation. A major civil rights organization, SNCC operated throughout the South and enjoyed support from people across the country.

The **Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC)**, whose first president was Martin Luther King Jr., grew out of the successful Montgomery Bus Boycott. The group worked to support and direct opposition to segregation by collaborating closely with Christian churches.

The **White Citizens’ Council** consisted of white leaders (e.g., bankers, newspaper editors, politicians and business owners) who banded together throughout the South to resist desegregation after the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* decision. Called the “uptown Klan” by Supreme Court Justice Thurgood Marshall, the members used their economic and political power to enforce white supremacy and oppose integration under the slogan “Never!”

**A Note on Lyndon Johnson in the film**: LBJ did more for racial equality than any other 20th century white politician. LBJ's journey from a typical Southern politician to a hero of the Civil Rights Movement is an example of the power of nonviolent direct action to work on the conscience of the oppressor group and make the case for reform. In fact, the process started before 1957, long before the Selma protests, and for most of the period shown by this movie, LBJ and Dr. King were working together to get a voting rights bill passed by the Congress in 1965. The movie doesn't show this, because the filmmakers needed a clear villain and couldn't figure out a way to show President Johnson's actual role while maintaining the tension in the film. So, most of the scenes showing LBJ are made up except the first conversation with Dr. King about timing of the push for a voting rights law, the meeting between George Wallace and LBJ, and the scene of LBJ addressing Congress. The other scenes involving President Johnson were made up by the filmmakers to create tension in the story. The relationship between MLK and LBJ was extraordinary because it involved the most powerful official of a country and a social activist cooperating to promote major social and political change. The remainder of the film is a reasonably accurate fictional rendition of what occurred.

U.S. History Name \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

***Selma* Viewing Questions**

Please fully respond to these questions on a separe sheet or typed. These questions are available as a Google Doc on our class website if you’d like to type your answers right under each question.

Read the questions before the movie and then answer them while/after you watch. (Some are better answered as you watch, while others are better answered at the end.)

1. The bombing of the church in Birmingham which killed four girls happened in 1963, whereas most of the events in the movie take place in 1964-1965. Why do you think the filmmaker in included the church bombing in the movie?
2. What different strategies and tactics did you see the different groups and individuals involved in the Civil Rights movement using to push for change in their society?
3. Describe the differences between SNCC (the student group) and SLCC (Dr. King’s organization).
4. How does the film portray the role of women in the Civil Rights movement?
5. Why do you think the events surrounding the Selma march were so able to capture the attention of Americans around the rest of the country?
6. Why do you think the filmmaker touched upon Dr. King’s extramarital affairs and his smoking habit?
7. Much of this movie is about the tension around *if* and *when* the Selma march should happen, with various forces (including Dr. King at some points) recommending the march not happen because it would be to explosive. In your opinion, when *was* the right time for the march to happen?
8. How should groups that want to create change in their societies use the Selma march as a model for their causes? How should groups today today take action to get their voices heard?